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Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Sixty-first session

Summary record (partial)* of the 1324th meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Monday, 20 July 2015, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Hayashi

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Combined fourth to eighth periodic reports of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (continued) (CEDAW/C/VCT/4-8, CEDAW/C/VCT/Q/4-8 and Add.1 and 2)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 14

2. **Ms. Zou** Xiaoqiao, with regard to article 12, said she would appreciate clarification on whether a woman required the consent of her spouse to have a tubal ligation; the replies stated that permission was an administrative practice applied at the discretion of the physician, but the woman could have the procedure even against the wishes of her husband. What was the situation in practice and what recourse did the woman have if she was denied the procedure? With regard to abortion, she noted that the report stated that rape was not considered grounds for an abortion; only counselling was available through the Family Court, the Family Services Division and the Gender Services Division. According to the replies, abortions could only be performed where the woman's life was at risk or the child would be seriously impaired. She asked if there were clear legal provisions governing the circumstances under which an abortion could legally be performed. It was not clear whether the decision was left to the individual and/or the health authorities.

3. Despite the delegation's claim that there were no backstreet abortions, the Committee had information that in fact many women had recourse to such abortions because the clinics known to offer illegal abortion services were too expensive. She asked if the delegation would care to comment and if any statistics on the number of legal and illegal abortions, including backstreet abortions, were available. She asked if any measures were envisaged to guarantee access to legal, safe abortions, for women and girls.

4. While the delegation's replies stated that persons under 18 had access to family planning services, she noted that they had to be accompanied by an adult. The Committee had information that traditional attitudes meant that family planning and health personnel tended to stigmatize sexually active schoolgirls, refused to provide them with contraceptives or even informed their parents of the fact. That contributed to adolescent pregnancy; the delegation should indicate what measures were in place to ensure that women and girls had access to reproductive and sexual health counselling and emergency contraception.

5. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), with regard to education, confirmed that vulnerable groups had lower primary school enrolment rates. Her Government was working to identify at-risk families and increase school enrolment, including through social protection measures. Families were provided, for example, with subsidies for each child attending school and the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Ministry of National Mobilisation, which was responsible for social protection measures, was strengthening efforts to monitor and reduce truancy and offer support to families. While no formal impact assessment of the effectiveness of such measures had as yet been carried out, attendance rates had improved.

6. At the secondary level, with regard to measures to deal with teen pregnancy, she said that a programme had been launched recently to collect data on and profile teen mothers and their households, identify any family or parental issues of concern, make a needs assessment and propose protection measures. In order to ensure that pregnant

teens could take advantage of that programme, the two ministries provided information circulars to school staff about how to identify and report suspected cases of teen pregnancies, for example by monitoring absenteeism and physical changes linked to pregnancy, although school staff were not yet always diligent in that regard. They were also working in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a new policy to facilitate the return to school of teen mothers and truants.

7. Since the preparation of the report, an improved school curriculum dealing with sexual and reproductive health had been developed and was currently offered in nearly 50 per cent of schools. It placed increased emphasis on roles, power and sexual issues in relationships. Information was also provided, in cooperation with the Planned Parenthood Association and the Ministry of Health, on contraception and making informed choices. There was also a programme to work with health centres to offer health education services to first-time and teenage parents with a view to reducing the possible social and psychological problems often linked to pregnancy, especially in rural areas.

8. Some progress had been made in improving the situation of rural women, whose unemployment rate was approximately double that of other women. Her Government was working to combat cultural stereotypes about the role of women; it would be implementing a comprehensive programme to analyse the situation of women in the workplace both on the mainland and in the Grenadines, under which disaggregated data in that regard would be collected. With regard to sexual harassment, she expected that under the new Domestic Violence Act, sexual harassment would be an offence subject to prosecution, especially since the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace had been identified by the drafters of the Act. Given that the Act had just been adopted, it would no doubt be a year before the relevant implementation measures were prepared and approved by the Cabinet.

9. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that it was currently quite rare for women to work at night, given the small size of the manufacturing sector, where shift work might occur, although she noted that many women worked as security guards and might work night shifts in that context. She stressed that women had access to all types of employment and were in fact encouraged to enrol in the Technical and Vocational Training branch of the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Community College. No information was available on why girls, who generally did well in school, did not find jobs, but she said that boys were more inclined to take any job whereas girls often had responsibilities in the home. The State party was still a developing country and there were not enough jobs for all its citizens. Given that situation, the State party had developed programmes to train young persons for professions in demand in other Caribbean States, for example teaching and nursing, so that graduates could obtain employment abroad. New measures had been introduced to ensure the certification of graduates' technical qualifications with a view to facilitating their employment elsewhere in the Caribbean.

10. The State party had made universal enrolment in secondary education a priority and was working to ensure that more girls completed their secondary education, in order to make them more employable. Whereas in the past only expensive private childcare had been available, new public childcare and early childhood education centres for preschool children had been established, including in rural communities. That meant that women had access to quality childcare near their homes and could therefore also have jobs.

11. With regard to the issue of women requiring their spouse's permission for a tubal ligation, she confirmed that, unfortunately, the health-care practitioner might insist on the spouse's permission; that was a situation that must be changed. She also confirmed

that an abortion could only legally be performed in a health-care facility in cases where the life of the mother was at risk or the baby would be seriously impaired. Abortion in any other circumstances was a crime. She had no statistics on the number of illegal abortions.

12. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that clarification was needed on whether the Domestic Violence Act specifically dealt with sexual harassment and, if so, how sexual harassment was defined. She was concerned that domestic violence was limited to family situations and the Act would not therefore deal with sexual harassment in general, including in the workplace. She would also welcome more information on the number of persons working elsewhere in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and their occupations and on any monitoring of their situation or measures adopted in the State party to train young people to meet the demand for labour in other States.

13. **Ms. Bailey** said that many Caribbean States tried to train their citizens to take jobs in neighbouring States and farther abroad, including in such areas as teaching and nursing. Such efforts might become counterproductive if all the Caribbean States adopted them. She suggested that a study should be undertaken of the gender implications of that labour mobility situation with a view to identifying possible bottlenecks. Lastly, she welcomed the State party's efforts to encourage women to work in non-traditional sectors.

14. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that while the Domestic Violence Act did not deal specifically with sexual harassment in the workplace, the issue of harassment outside the family unit, including in the workplace, had certainly been raised during the drafting of the Act. A way would have to be found to broaden the scope of application of the Act to those areas.

15. Turning to the issue of statistics, she said that some data on the employment situation of women were available in CARICOM documents; information was also available from the Department of Labour and from the tourism sector, including, for example, the number of citizens working on cruise ships. National data collected since 2010 showed that most women from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines living abroad worked as nurses and teachers. The Government had launched technical and vocational training programmes targeted at women and would shortly hold consultations with relevant stakeholders to discuss the introduction of quotas aimed at increasing women's representation in traditionally male-dominated occupations.

16. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that the Government had taken a number of steps to encourage women and girls to study non-traditional subjects and had established a link with the University of Technology in Jamaica with a view to creating additional technical training opportunities for women.

17. **Ms. Pomeranzi** asked to what extent had women benefited from the country's economic growth since 2010. She also wished to know how many women had received cash transfer payments under the social security system and loans from the various national microcredit schemes in recent years. As for rural and disadvantaged groups of women, she asked what measures had been taken to improve their access to landownership and credit facilities. She also wished to know whether rural women had access to basic services, such as water and sanitation. Had the Government incorporated a gender perspective into its national disaster management and relief strategies in order to provide protection to vulnerable groups of women living in rural and remote areas? Lastly, she asked whether the State party had participated in the country gender assessments conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CARIBANK) and, if so, what data had been collected.

18. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that the Government intended to incorporate a gender focus into its national development plan in order to facilitate women's access to the labour market and reduce poverty levels. It had also participated in the country gender assessments conducted by UN-Women and CARIBANK and would use the resulting data to develop gender-sensitive national policies. Following the reform of the social security system in 2014, female-headed households had been the main recipients of cash transfer payments. A social protection programme had also been introduced to support single mothers' economic development and raise their income levels.

19. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that the Government, in cooperation with the European Union, had launched a social investment fund that provided development assistance to rural communities, which had been affected by the banana industry crisis. The Government had also introduced a series of additional microcredit programmes that provided loans of up to US$ 15,000 for women seeking to set up their own businesses. Rural women had the same property rights as men and could use land in their name as collateral. Many women had also taken advantage of the Government's recent efforts to transform areas occupied by squatters into plots of land for purchase.

20. The Central Water and Sewage Authority, the agency responsible for water and sanitation, ensured that water and sanitation services reached rural areas. Sanitation, rubbish collection and water services were available even in the Grenadines, where water was limited during the dry season and where programmes had been set up to develop desalination plants in order to ensure that salt water was converted into fresh water. The sanitation and water services were excellent in her country.

21. Over the past decade or so, responses to several different types of disaster had been developed under the National Disaster Response Plan. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines experienced volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and regular flooding. Disaster management fell directly under the responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office. There had been infrastructure development, which was challenging in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, where the terrain was very mountainous and, after it rained, rivers could wash away everything in their path, including sturdy bridges. The response was prompt in rural communities struck by disasters. Shelter management had been fine-tuned so that women and families were not adversely affected. When disasters occurred, there was provision for children to continue to go to school. Families sometimes had to stay in shelters for months; after the last disaster, families had occupied shelters for at least six months while the Government built new houses for them and provided new appliances and other benefits; many of those families were female-headed households.

22. Significant resources had been allocated to indigenous communities in recent years. Those communities did not live in remote places given that Saint Vincent was a small island and the longest one could travel was one hour by car, but they had not been easily accessible in the past because a gully with no bridge had barred the way. A bridge had since been built, however, and currently all those communities could be reached by road.

23. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that between 2009 and 2011, there had been a potable water distribution programme through which the Government had provided people with water in their homes. Currently, the Government provided subsidies for water and electricity payments for low-income individuals. The Government also provided rental subsidies to victims of domestic violence who wished to leave their home and live independently until they could get jobs. The Government had approved a backyard gardening development programme for rural communities, a joint venture between the Ministry of Agriculture and the

Caribbean Development Bank, which enabled women to start up local small businesses. A single mother protection programme offered job placement, training, counselling and childcare subsidies.

24. **Ms. Pomeranzi** said that the social protection measures taken did not appear to translate into the economic empowerment of women in rural areas. About 30 per cent of women lived under the poverty line. Why had the struggle against poverty not been effective over the past five years?

25. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said the Government had adopted a clear strategy for all social protection agencies for the benefit of women and children, including rural development. As the Government had not yet conducted a second poverty assessment, it could not determine precisely the impact of its poverty reduction efforts over the past five years. Since 2010 there had been three major internal and external shocks that had exacerbated poverty for those already below the poverty line, namely the economic crisis, hurricanes and three major flash floods in three years.

26. **Ms. Bailey** asked whether the 2015 gender analysis conducted by the Government had been an analysis of the poverty assessment or a separate exercise.

27. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that the country poverty assessment had first been carried out, followed by a poverty reduction strategy. The country gender assessment that followed thereafter had been used to inform the strategy.

Articles 15 and 16

28. **Ms. Patten** said that de facto unions constituted more than 50 per cent of all existing unions, and it was a matter of concern that women living in such unions had no de jure or de facto legal protection. She asked whether child maintenance was covered under the Family Code or other laws for children born out of wedlock.

29. What measures, including legislative measures, had been undertaken to ensure that there were no disparities in maintenance awards between children born in and out of wedlock and that, in all cases, the best interests of the child were paramount? Did unmarried women have recourse to the attachment of wages of the father of a child if he failed to pay maintenance? Was non-payment of child support or spousal support a punishable offence? It was not clear why there was such a high incidence of female-headed households. More information was needed on the nature of de facto unions, civil marriages and the divorce rate in the country. She asked whether polygamy was prohibited. Was the Government envisaging a system of registration for de facto unions, with comprehensive protection for the women in such relationships and their children? Had the Government sought technical assistance for family law reform? She drew the delegation's attention to the Committee's general recommendation No. 29 on the economic consequences of marriage and family relations and their dissolution. Lastly, she wished to know what property regimes were in place and what was their impact on the economic rights of women.

30. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that maintenance for children born in and out of wedlock was covered under the law and no distinction was made between them. The Family Code applied equally to all persons seeking support. Maintenance awards were granted on the basis of evidence that was brought before the courts by the parent in question. The court made an award on the basis of the other partner's capacity to pay against what was being claimed. All legal distinctions in terms of the right to property, inheritance and other rights between children born in and out of wedlock had been eliminated under the Status of Children Act of 1990.

Fathers who failed to pay court-ordered maintenance awards were liable to prosecution.

31. As yet, no research had been conducted to explain the high incidence of female-headed households. There was no legislative framework for the registration of de facto unions. Polygamy was prohibited. Lastly, her Government had taken part in the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States Domestic Violence and Family Law Reform project between 2005 and 2010, involving an assessment of all the laws relating to the family.

32. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that two relevant laws had been promulgated in 2015, the Childcare and Adoption Act and the Status of Children Act, which would further the implementation of the Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

33. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that ownership of private property was gender neutral and no distinction was made between married and single people. Married women were free to include or exclude their husbands from their deeds to property.

34. **Ms. Bailey** asked whether the Government was considering making the minimum age for marriage the same for men and women under the law.

35. **Ms. Ellis Browne** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that to her knowledge that issue had not been addressed, but the delegation would provide the Committee with further information on the matter at a later date.

36. **Ms. Finch Burke** (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) said that she was grateful for the constructive dialogue and for the Committee's recommendations.

37. **The Chairperson** thanked the delegation and urged the State party to fully implement the Committee's final recommendations, for the benefit of all women and girls in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.